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Getting, and Ignoring, Goods on Soviet Designs in Europe

By PHILIP GEYELIN

MONS, Belgium—The military commanders at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe think that they have the goods on the Soviet Union's dark designs in Europe. Secret aerial photographs from American spy satellites clearly reveal military deployments that can have only offensive—not defensive—purposes. They believe that publication of this evidence might work wonders on European public opinion, and in turn on parliamentary votes on defense spending. A bigger European effort could conceivably silence a growing number of American critics who threaten to pull out American troops if the European allies are unwilling to take on a larger share of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization burden.

Yet the Reagan Administration, which has not hesitated to use similar aerial photos as evidence in seeking public support and congressional funds for its policies in Central America and the Caribbean, has steadfastly refused to make this evidence public. Why? Gen. Bernard Rogers, the supreme allied commander in Europe, would like to know. He has been told that the publication of these photographs could compromise intelligence-gathering, but he is puzzled by the "nuance" between aerial surveillance from fixed-wing aircraft over Nicaragua and spy-satellite surveillance of Warsaw Pact deployment.

Rogers is a Rhodes scholar, a combat veteran and a former Army chief of staff. He understands the intelligence-gatherers' problem, but he also believes in the business of balancing risks, and the "basic challenge that we face in this alliance," he told me in a long interview, is "to convince the people, particularly in Western Europe, that there is a threat to their freedom."

Rogers sees two ominous trends. One is a widening Soviet advantage in conventional military power along the European front. The other is a growing temptation among "serious people, not just kooks" to think in terms of pacifism, neutralism, accommodation. As these trends converge, he believes it possible that we will "wake up some morning" and find the Soviets in a commanding position—not necessarily to start a war, but to subject Europeans to irresistible diplomatic and economic blackmail.

Even if Rogers is wrong, the runaround that he has been getting from Washington is a commentary on the Administration's management of national-security affairs. The point is not so much whether the release of this evidence would do everything that Rogers imagines it would. It is that he has been pressing what he thinks is

an important case at the highest levels, and even getting a sympathetic hearing, for almost four years. What he has *not* been getting is anything like a considered response reflecting a serious effort to choose between risks and opportunities.

Instead, intelligence technicians have been bottling up useful and damning evidence at a time when Europeans are regularly falling short in meeting NATO commitments, the Soviets are moving ahead in sheer numbers of tanks, helicopters and other armaments, and Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) is using his considerable prestige to round up Senate support for drawing down U.S. forces if Europeans don't do more in their own behalf.

Rogers believes that this would be the "unraveling" of the alliance. He sees hard-pressed European coalition governments under heavy pressure for social-welfare spending, so he would try to strengthen their hand with public opinion. Many Europeans doubt the numbers, even the existence, of the Soviet intermediate-range ballistic missiles that constitute the rationale for the hard-won alliance agreement to deploy countervailing U.S. missiles in Western Europe.

The average European, he contends, does a lot of wishful thinking about the purely defensive posture of Warsaw Pact forces: "You can show the offensive nature of the Warsaw Pact if you can show the massive amounts of pre-positioned river-crossing equipment, the massive amount of pre-positioned (petroleum) pipeline and their ability to lay that pipeline up to 90 kilometers a day." He also has photographic evidence of the location and specific weaponry of Warsaw Pact units.

He has tested his theory. With the permission of Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, he gave a slide show for a select group of European cabinet ministers: "You could hear the breath being sucked in when they saw the pictures for the first time." He believes in it enough to have signed on for another two-year hitch, with the Reagan Administration's blessing.

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Few American authorities question his analysis. The debate is over what to do. And the remedy of choice, increasingly, is to think in terms of threats that the United States will simply walk away from the problem. Rogers makes a good case that before it comes to that we should lay out our best evidence of the Soviet threat and see how the Europeans respond.